

Jailed resistance leader Xanana Gusmao on East Timor's future.

Evidence that Indonesian authorities are indeed honouring their pledge to allow jailed East Timorese resistance leader Xanana Gusmao free access to the international media.

Earlier, Mr Gusmao spoke directly to Asia Pacific's Peter Mares by phone from the house where he is detained in Jakarta.

He said he saw no evidence that the Indonesian military, ABRI, was ready to disband pro-integration militia groups that it has equipped with weapons - and Mr Gusmao expressed concern that his repeated appeals for the disarmament of all factions in East Timor are not to being heard.

He says there can be no settlement in East Timor, until peace is established in the territory.

President Habibie has offered wide-ranging autonomy to East Timor within the Indonesian republic - and he says the territory will become independent, if the people of East Timor reject this option.

The big question is just how the East Timorese people themselves are to be consulted

Xanana Gusmao believes that a referendum is still the best option:

Gusmao: I think that in principle we still defend the referendum as the democratic and fair way to know what the East Timorese people want and it is in principle our position. Because if all East Timorese are crying out to say that each part has the majority, we will prove in this act.

Mares: So the referendum will prove what the majority wants in East Timor?

Gusmao: Yes, I think it is the best way to do that.

Mares: However, Indonesia has ruled out a referendum, is there some other way, some other form of consultation that would be acceptable to you?

Gusmao: I think so, I think that if we try to find out a mechanism that can prove the representativeness of the decision in a democratic way, I think that it is possible

Mares: Have you got suggestions as for how that could be done?

Gusmao: I cannot say anything, because we are trying to find

the solution or to find a possibility to help the United Nations to consider .

Mares: Many East Timorese leaders such as Bishop Belo who is currently in Australia have warned against the risks of sudden independence for East Timor. Do you see risks in sudden independence?

Gusmao: I don't think so, I don't think so because we are fighting 23 years and we know well our political control over the population and the problem the threat of war, it is, I can say it is just a bluff from some people, irresponsible people that claim that it would be a civil war. I already said that if each East Timorese thinks about the need to put an end of the violence, all of us can work together to achieve the peace in East Timor. But our appeals seem not to be heard by the integrationist part and by the government and we already said that we are ready in any time to surrender the weapons, together with the East Timorese armed by ABRI, under the supervision and control of a United Nations peace keeping force. We have to create a peaceful atmosphere in East Timor before talking about the solution. It is I think it is the positive and the mature attitude that we ask from everybody who are concerning about this situation in East Timor.

Mares: Do you see any evidence however that the Indonesian military are ready to pull out of East Timor or that they are ready disarm the pro-integrationist militias that they have provided with weapons?

Gusmao: What we are trying, is to persuade the occupation authorities to think about the problem of the civilians, or the armed civilians. If the Indonesian government has decided to let East Timorese people decide over its own future I think that the first step - the first and the most important step is to think about how to stop the violence, how to stop the provocations, how to stop the military hostilities. Till now, we don't have any evidence that ABRI is ready to do something in this direction.

Mares: So you have not had any signs in your meetings with Indonesian officials, you haven't had any sign that the Indonesian military is ready to withdraw or ready to disarm the gangs that it has supplied with weapons?

Gusmao: You are right and we are trying to appeal, we are appealing to the international community to help us, not us the 'independentiste' faction, but to help the East Timorese people and to find out the mechanism to send to the territory a small body of peace-keeping force. To us, if we start to disarm all factions, it would be the conditions sine qua non, to stop violence and to look for a peaceful situation in East Timor.

Mares: Are you concerned that the Indonesian military may deliberately seek to destabilise an independent East Timor?

Gusmao: I think that we cannot isolate the East Timor issue, or the situation in the territory, from the overall situation in Indonesia and I think that ABRI is pretending to create the situation to persuade public opinion that the East Timorese people are not ready to decide its own destiny.

Mares: Over the weekend, popular Indonesian presidential candidate Megawati Sukarnoputri told a rally of 100-thousand supporters in Jakarta, that she believed East Timor should STAY with Indonesia.

When I asked Xanana Gusmao about her comments, he described Ms Megawati as the leader of a party which had struggled for democracy for more than thirty years during the rule of former President Suharto.

He said he could not imagine that she would not respect the fundamental rights of the people of East Timor..

Gusmao: I cannot imagine that the leader of a well known democratic party that was fighting in the New Order era, cannot respect the fundamental right of all the peoples in the world, cannot respect the principles of democracy. I suppose that the problem is just a simple political game by arguing the legality of the present Indonesian government and the legitimacy of the statements from President Habibie. I wish I am right but I don't think it would be the position of a democratic leader who fought a three decades era of injustice, of undemocratic rule and I think that Megawati would be aware that the East Timor issue would be a stone in her shoes.

Mares: So do you think that Megawati's comments are really posturing for the forthcoming elections in Indonesia ?.

Gusmao: Maybe, I wish that is the problem.

Mares: Is your aim then to get a deal on East Timor's future before those elections in June?

Gusmao: It depends on our efforts to create the fundamental conditions. Now I can't say more than that it would be better, the East Timorese people not to participate in the next Indonesian general elections.

Mares: It would be better if they didn't participate in the elections in East Timor - why not ?

Gusmao: Because if East Timorese don't accept alternative one, automatically East Timorese people would face the alternative two.

Mares: You mean if they don't accept the offer of autonomy that President Habibie has made, then automatically they would become independent?

Gusmao: Yes it is they said, and I think that we have to decide before the Indonesian general elections I think.

Mares: That question of autonomy or independence must be decided before the elections?

Gusmao: I think yeh, it has to be a consensus between all parties involved in the negotiating process, but in my opinion, if we get a decision from East Timorese people, if East Timorese people decide to accept the alternative one, East Timorese people can participate in the Indonesia general elections.

Mares: So if the East Timorese people accept autonomy as part of Indonesia, then the election should go ahead?

Gusmao: Yes

Mares: But if they reject autonomy, then there should be no elections?

Gusmao: Yeh, it is my opinion, it is the best way to solve the

problem.

Mares: Assuming for a moment that East Timor will become independent, how can you go about healing the wounds in East Timorese society, healing the splits and the very real splits between people that have been on different sides of politics in East Timor ?.

Gusmao: I understand this question, I understand the fears, not only from the East Timorese but from Indonesian society also and from the international community, but I have to say you that we know well the political conditions in East Timor and we believe that we can assure, to all East Timorese citizens that an independent state would assure the right of each East Timorese to live and to have the opportunity to participate fully in the national reconstruction.

Mares: What about Indonesian settlers in East Timor, what guarantees can you give them about their safety in an independent East Timor?

Gusmao: It is a very sensitive issue and in the present situation we assure them that nobody would be injured, would be killed, would be expelled from East Timor. But sincerely, frankly, we have to say to them, to the transmigrants, that for the interests of our people we cannot accept the transmigrants there who are occupying areas owned by our population and we would coordinate with the minister of transmigration program, Mr Hendropriyono, to see how to get them back to Indonesia.

Mares: So you think that transmigrants who have come to East Timor will have to leave?.

Gusmao: Yeh, we cannot promise the paradise in East Timor to the Indonesian migrants and settle our own people in the mountains.

Mares: Would any Indonesians be allowed to stay in East Timor?

Gusmao: Yes of course. Our independence is not a closed independence but an open independence and our door would be open to everybody.

Mares: What kind of state would an independent East Timor be, what kind of system do you envisage?

Gusmao: A multi-party, parliamentary system and a free-market system to in general terms. I am not the right person to answer this question in economic terms because I am only a guerrilla and it is also not my decision by it would be the decision of every component of the East Timorese society.

Mares: What role would Falantil, what role would the guerrilla movement play in an independent East Timor ?

Gusmao: We are committed that an independent East Timor would not have any more army, but Falantil would be the symbolic army to remember the heroism and determination of a small group of guerrillas who fought bravely to achieve independence and we will maintain ourselves as a symbolic army until we die.

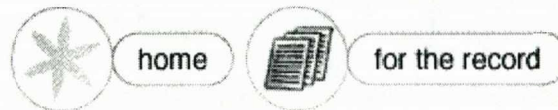
Mares: What do you mean by a symbolic army?

Gusmao: Symbolic army because we will not have any weapons in East Timor as a part of our commitment to the future of our country, of our generation and a commitment to peace in the world.

Mares: And what role can Australia play in particular at this time ?

Gusmao: At this time, I think the important, important, important one Australia can play is to firstly ask to the Indonesian government to dissolve the civilians who have been armed to disturb, to intimidate the population, and show the disposition to contribute to achieve a peaceful situation there, because without peace there would not be any solution in East Timor. We have to persuade the international community that it is urgent and necessary to achieve peace by a ceasefire and disarmament controlled by the United Nations Peace Keeping force as a first and important step to a just and democratic solution in East Timor.++

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